

NEWS RELEASE



OFFICE OF THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

San Diego, California

***United States Attorney
Carol C. Lam***

For Further Information, Contact: Assistant United States Attorney William Cole (619) 557-7859

For Immediate Release

NEWS RELEASE SUMMARY - June 16, 2004

United States Attorney Carol C. Lam announced the guilty pleas in San Diego today of two defendants involved in smuggling a group of 21 undocumented aliens through the desert of Imperial County in a single Chevrolet Suburban, which resulted in the deaths of four of the aliens. According to the indictment which initiated the prosecution, while en route from the Mexican border through the desert, the load vehicle blew a tire and rolled over on Highway 78. Four of the aliens—Carlos Echevarria-Bribiezca, Rosalva Maldonado-Romero, Jose Refugio Ortega-Nieves, and a male juvenile—died in the accident. All others were injured, including the two defendants, VICTOR MANUEL VELASQUEZ-ROMERO and GUADALUPE FIERRO-CHAVEZ.

As part of a plea agreement, the driver of the load vehicle, VELASQUEZ-ROMERO, pled guilty today to: one count of bringing in an illegal alien, resulting in death; and three counts of bringing in illegal aliens for financial gain. Under a separate plea agreement, FIERRO-CHAVEZ, the guide who led the group of aliens into the United States, pled guilty to: one count of bringing in an illegal alien, resulting in death, and one count of bringing in an illegal alien for financial gain.

According to Assistant United States Attorney William Cole, who is prosecuting the case, VELASQUEZ-ROMERO faces a maximum sentence of life in prison and a minimum mandatory sentence of five years in prison. FIERRO-CHAVEZ faces a maximum sentence of life in prison and minimum mandatory sentence of three years in prison. The defendants are scheduled to appear for sentencing before the Honorable Irma E. Gonzalez in United States District Court in San Diego on September 17, 2004 at 9:00 a.m.

United States Attorney Lam said, "This office will do everything within our power to hold accountable those smugglers who endanger the public, law enforcement officials, or the lives of undocumented aliens entering the United States."

DEFENDANTS

Victor Manuel Velasquez-Romero
Guadalupe Fierro-Chavez

SUMMARY OF CHARGES

Defendant VELASQUEZ-ROMERO

One Count: Bringing in an Illegal Alien Resulting in Death.
Violation: 8 U.S.C. § 1324(a)(1)(A)(I) and (B)(iv).
Maximum Penalty: Life imprisonment and/or a \$250,000 fine.

Three Counts: Bringing in an Illegal Alien for Financial Gain.
Violation: 8 U.S.C. § 1324(a)(2)(B)(ii).
Maximum Penalty: Ten years' imprisonment with a minimum mandatory sentence of three years' imprisonment for each count and/or a \$250,000 fine (as to Counts One and Two)
Maximum Penalty: Fifteen years' imprisonment with a minimum mandatory sentence of five years' imprisonment and/or a \$250,000 fine (as to Count Three)

Defendant FIERRO-CHAVEZ

One Count: Bringing in an Illegal Alien Resulting in Death.
Violation: 8 U.S.C. § 1324(a)(1)(A)(I) and (B)(iv).
Maximum Penalty: Life imprisonment and/or a \$250,000 fine.

One Count: Bringing in an Illegal Alien for Financial Gain.
Violation: 8 U.S.C. § 1324(a)(2)(B)(ii).
Maximum Penalty: Ten years' imprisonment with a minimum mandatory sentence of three years' imprisonment for each count and/or a \$250,000 fine

AGENCIES United States Border Patrol, United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement, California Highway Patrol, and Imperial County Sheriff's Office